

## **Audubon Society keeping watch on owl project**

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**By Shirley Wentworth Herald Basin bureau**

The burrowing owls appear sweet to Charlotte Reep.

"They preen each other and put their wings around each other," said Reep, coordinator of the Lower Columbia Basin Audubon Society's burrowing owl project.

As part of that project, Reep helps monitor more than 90 artificial nests the group has installed in the Tri-City area. The Lower Columbia Basin chapter works in conjunction with researchers from the University of Arizona who are tracking population trends of burrowing owls in Eastern Washington.

They hope to learn what environmental factors are involved in owl survival and if there is a difference in the reproductive success of owls who nest in artificial or natural burrows. The program has study sites in the Tri-City area and in the Othello-Moses Lake area.

Right now, Reep is most concerned with a small site located next to the Kennewick Wal-Mart. The site was identified by researchers as one of the most important burrowing owl sites in the Tri-City area.

Before the construction of the store, Wal-Mart officials agreed to take short-term steps to protect the owls and did place a dozen artificial burrows and surrounded them with makeshift fencing. They also agreed to follow through with a long-term plan to develop suitable habitat to ensure the owls' survival in the region.

Those who monitor the owl burrows near the store have frequently found the fence open and the site filled with tire tracks from campers, RVs and trucks. The PVP plastic used to construct tunnels into underground nests are cracked and broken. There's also a "for sale" sign on the corner.

And despite a Jan. 16, 2002, conference call in which Wal-Mart officials expressed interest in the owls' needs and how they could contribute to research and education, no one involved in the studies has heard from them since, Reep said.

Rick Leamont, conservation chairman for the Lower Columbia Basin Audubon Society, said officials with the local chapter are talking to counterparts at the Audubon's state office about taking legal action against the retail giant.

"We're very frustrated," he said. "Unfortunately, when your phone calls don't get returned, legal action is sometimes your only recourse."

Wal-Mart spokeswoman Sharon Webber researched the question of Wal-Mart's involvement and responded that Wal-Mart officials consider their obligation fulfilled.

The burrowing owls are listed as endangered in Canada, threatened in Mexico, and as a federal species of concern in the United States.

Burrowing owl populations are considered to be declining in nine states, including Washington. They are considered threatened or endangered in Minnesota and Iowa.

In a 2002 population study, Courtney Conway, the principal investigator on the project, reported that potential nest burrows are destroyed in Eastern Washington every year and preventing a population decline depends partly on maintaining available nest burrows.

He also said creating new burrows is important in preventing declines. About 20 percent of the nest burrows monitored by his group have been destroyed during the last two years, he said in an e-mail. The destruction is much higher in the Tri-City study area than in the Grant-Adams study area, he wrote.

Claire Sanders, a research technician from the University of Arizona program working at the McNary Wildlife Refuge, said the greatest threat to the burrows in the Tri-City area are construction and housing projects. Many of the burrows in the Othello-Moses Lake study area are found in crop fields, where they are threatened by agricultural practices.

Conway said work with farmers and ranchers who have nesting owls on their land should be a priority. While artificial burrows are less susceptible to predators, fewer burrowing owls in Washington seem to use the artificial burrows.